Seven social media safety tips for sport organizations

Social media's power lies in its ability to spread information rapidly in a branching pattern across the Internet. This power, however, is also why many organizations are nervous about using social media, since once you release content online, you lose control over it. This can feel deeply unsettling to those used to more traditional forms of marketing and communications.

It's no secret that social media safety is a common worry among sports organizations. In fact, in a recent viaSport communications survey, almost 80% of Provincial Sport Organizations (PSOs) said that they did not feel well-informed about the subject and would like more information.
This module will take a pragmatic approach to online safety so that your organization can balance the risk of social media with the potential reward. With a little planning, your sport organization can tackle issues of safety before they happen and navigate social media with greater confidence.

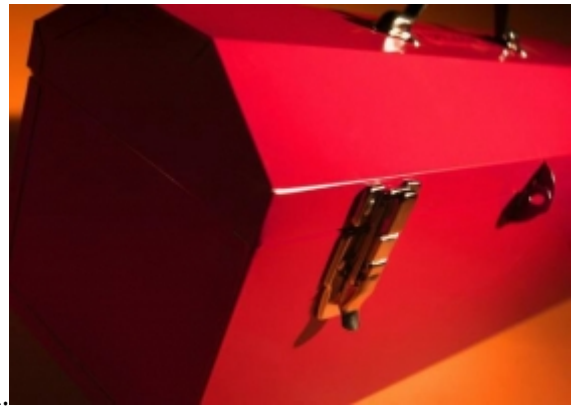
What you will find in Module 25:

What risks does my sport organization face?

Though many people see the Internet as a shadowy place rife with hackers and predators, studies show that this belief is mostly fear mongering. The Internet does indeed have dark and disturbing corners, but the vast majority of threats facing organizations and individuals online actually come from real-life issues playing out via social media. It is, for example, much more likely that an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend of an athlete might use your organization's social media as a stalking tool than it is that a random stranger will see an athlete's picture on your Facebook page and decide to stalk him or her.

That said, there are three types of risks that sports organizations face online:

- Risk to your members;
- Risk of revealing sensitive information;
- Risk to your organization's reputation.



All of these risk factors are largely within your control. That's why we've assembled an arsenal of tools that will allow you to stop most problems before they start. It's worth noting, however, that common sense is your best weapon against online risk. The vast majority of your staff and members are communicating appropriately online, and the bulk of your organization's interactions online will be positive. By equipping your members with a few simple strategies, however, you can provide a framework for social media safety that will allow your members to make good decisions online.

The online safety arsenal:

Weapon #1: A social media policy

Vince Lombardi (paraphrasing Ovid) famously said that the best offense is a strong defense. When it comes to social media safety, a social media policy is your first line of defense. A well-written social media policy not only allows you to set clear guidelines for social media use, but also forces you to think through potential threats before they happen.

The viaSport toolkit contains a thorough module on creating a social media policy for your sports organization, but it's worth noting some safety questions that should be addressed:

- **What information will we never release online?** Personal information like addresses, phone numbers and email addresses should, for example, always be banned from social media. In some circumstances, other information such as new training techniques, athlete injuries or team strategies might also be prohibited.
- **How will we respond to criticism or falsehoods about our organization online?** Reputation management is an important aspect of a social media policy. By having written guidelines for your response rather than responding based on emotion, you'll avoid fanning the flames of online discord.
- **What content requires approval before being posted?** Potentially sensitive content should be approved by a higher-up such as an Executive Director.
- **How will our online behaviour reflect our mission, vision and goals?** Instead of focusing on reducing negative behaviour, focus on increasing positive behaviour.
- **How will we handle infractions of our social media policy?** Good social media policies

favour education over discipline.
- **What is our privacy policy?** Your social media policy should contain a simple privacy policy that lays out how you will ensure that your members' information is kept out of the wrong hands.

Weapon #2: A social media action plan

A social media action plan allows your organization to set goals for social media and use and measure them using analytics. Not only does this practice save time and human resources, but it also mitigates online risk by forcing organizations to think through the consequences of their social media content in advance, rather than posting on a whim.

To learn how to create a social media action plan, read Module 15: Nine easy steps to creating a social media action plan.

Weapon #3: A strong communications network

Since most social media risk comes from real-world scenarios, it's important to keep the lines of communication open in your organization. In many PSOs, sensitive situations are dealt with on a need-to-know basis, which means that a communications staff member who is unaware of a situation could unwittingly expose a member to danger.

Say, for example, that an athlete is dealing with a stalker. The athlete might alert a coach or even the organization's Executive Director, but this information might not reach the communications staff member, who might accidentally reveal the athlete's whereabouts by posting photos from a training camp.

Your organization should have a clear communications chain for dealing with real- life risks facing your members. The social media point of contact should be alerted to the threat, though he or she does not have to be given specific details. When a threat does occur, key stakeholders should meet to adjust your social media practices to ensure the member's safety.

Weapon #4: An organizational voice guide

Many threats to an organization's reputation come not from malicious intent, but from accidental gaffes. Having a simple organizational voice policy allows your organization to communicate with a clear style and tone. It also discusses how potentially sensitive rhetorical devices such as humour should be used.

To create an organizational voice guide, read Module 7: Organizational Voice 101.

Weapon #5: Education

The most finely crafted social media policy or organizational voice guideline will be useless unless your members understand and follow it. Encourage coaches to educate your athletes on appropriate social media use (our module Social Media 101 for Coaches contains information on this subject) and educate your members via your newsletter and your website. To help your members buy in to your social media policy, make sure to welcome comments and feedback.

Weapon #6: Analytics

By controlling your own social media practices and educating your members on appropriate social media use, your organization can mitigate the vast majority of threats. Occasionally, however, your social media content might fall into the wrong hands or be repurposed in an unauthorized way. The best way to uncover these threats is to pay attention to strange spikes in your social media analytics. For example, I once posted an innocuous video interview with a female athlete. One day, it received thousands of views, putting it well outside the range of views the interview series had previously received. I used YouTube's Analytics to trace the views back to an X-rated website that had reposted the video. I immediately issued a takedown notice.

We'll have a more in-depth module on analytics, but our Facebook 101, Twitter 101 and YouTube 101 guides all contain analytics information.

Weapon #7: The one layer rule 

Your organization should always provide a barrier between your members and the general public online. While it's obviously not possible to prevent a determined person from finding your members' information through other channels, you should provide one layer of separation between your members and the general public in your official social media communication.
If, for example, you are running an "Ask an Athlete" or "Ask a Coach" series where the public can submit questions by Twitter, these questions must be directed at the PSO, not the athlete/coach so that they can be vetted. If someone contacts you through Facebook or Twitter to ask how to get in contact with a member, you must not give up sensitive information like an email address. Instead, offer to take the person's email address and pass it along to the member.

By always asking yourself **"have I provided one layer between my members and the general public?"** you can act as a filter to reduce the chance that your members will be exposed to risk.

A word on dealing with minors 

In the USA, online distribution of photos of children is governed by the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998. Such specific regulations do not currently exist in Canada. Most Canadian laws surrounding online privacy target commercial enterprises, but lawmakers recommend that all organizations follow similar guidelines around using the images of children under 13:

- Get explicit permission from the parent or guardian before posting a photo of a child online, since some children in foster care or who are involved in a custody situation may be legally prohibited from appearing on social media;
- Ensure that the photo doesn't contain any identifying information like a school sweatshirt or a recognizable landmark (like a school);
- Keep all photos featuring children who cannot be shown on social media in a special folder so that they do not accidentally end up on online;
- Do not tag children in social media photos;
- Do not reveal a child's name in social media photos;
- Favour group shots over close-up shots.

Got a question about online safety? Have a story on how your organization dealt with these issues? Get in the conversation by contacting Arley McNeney at arley@bcwheelchairsports.com

Sources:

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